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ABSTRACT

Research on children's adjustment following divorce suggests that the choice of custodial parent may be an important factor. To examine the process by which parents decide on custody of their children in a divorce, a sample of divorcing couples (N=55) drawn from a large urban county and three rural counties, participated in tape recorded interviews and completed two forms of the Custody Decision Form (CDF). In the first form parents rated the importance of 20 general criteria and 6 additional criteria if they applied. On the second form parents were also required to rate the extent to which each consideration favored either the mother or the father. Statistical analyses showed that mothers and fathers agreed on the relative importance of various criteria (e.g., continuity in the child's environment, quality of the parent-child relationship) but not on the extent to which each criterion favored either partner. Priorities actually used to decide custody (e.g., ability to provide financially, parent's sense of responsibility for the child's well-being) differed somewhat from those rated most important (e.g., emotional stability of the parent, suitability of the parent's lifestyle or morals, parenting skills). Parents rated themselves as more suitable for custody than they were rated by their partners. Generally, fathers were less satisfied than mothers with the custody arrangement (75 percent of the couples agreed on mother custody, 13 percent agreed on joint custody, and 10 percent had not yet decided). (WAS)

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Child Custody in Divorce:

Parents Describe Their Decisions

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Child Custody in Divorce:
Parents Describe Their Decisions

Abstract

A sample of 55 divorcing couples provided interview and questionnaire data regarding the factors they considered in reaching a decision about the custody of their children. Mothers and fathers were in agreement on the relative importance of various criteria (e.g., continuity in the child's environment, quality of the parent-child relationship) but did not agree on the extent to which each criterion favored one or the other to have custody. Parents rated themselves as more suitable to have custody than they were perceived by their partner. Generally fathers were less satisfied than mothers with the custody arrangement (75% of the couples agreed on mother custody, 13% on joint custody, and 10% had not yet decided).

Divorce is an increasingly frequent part of the lives of American families. Recent estimates indicate that about 40% of new marriages will end in divorce and that about 45% of today's children will spend some part of their first 18 years in a single-parent household (Bureau of the Census, 1979). One of the most important (and frequently most difficult) decisions faced by divorcing parents is determining who will have custody of their children. Although a variety of other arrangements are possible (e.g., joint custody, divided or shared custody, and split custody), one parent having full custody of all the children from the marriage, with the other parent having visitation rights, is by far the most frequent arrangment (Moore & Davenport, 1979; Lewis, Note 2).

Research on children's adjustment following a divorce suggests that the choice of custodial parent may be important to children's subsequent adjustment. Hess and Camara (1979) looked at children ages 9 to 11 in intact families and in families two years after the parents' divorce. They found that parent-child relationships were a more important influence on children's functioning than parent-parent relationships in three out of four areas: peer relationship, work effectiveness in school, and aggression. Parent-parent discord was more important only in accounting for symptoms of stress in the children. [The author also found that marital status (divorced vs. intact) was less important than any of the relationship variables (parent-child and parent-parent.)]

Hetherington, Cox & Cox (1978) followed a group of preschool children for two years after the divorce of their parents. Using multiple measures of emotional, social, cognitive, and sex-role development, they found that characteristics of the custodial parent and of the custodial parent-child relationship showed a much stronger influence on the child's adjustment in almost every area than did characteristics of the noncustodial parent or of his relationship with the child. The noncustodial parent continued to have an impact after two years only in the area of sex-role development.

Although frequent and continuing contact with the noncustodial parent is preferred by and important to most children (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1977; Moore & Davenport, 1979; Rosen, 1977), the literature suggests that, as long as single-parent custody is the norm, some priority should be given to selecting the parent who can best serve the developmental needs of the child. In the estimated 90% of divorce cases in which custody is not contested (Lewis, 1978), this decision is made by the ~~court~~ parents (Lowery, 1979). At present, parents seldom receive any assistance or outside input in making their decision from either mental health professionals (an estimated 16%) or their attorneys (an estimated 13%) (Marschall & Gatz, 1975).

The only study to date which has examined the process by which parents make their decision about custody was a survey conducted by Marschall and Gatz (1975). They asked divorce members of Parents Without Partners to note the importance of "fifteen traditional custody criteria" (p. 52) in determining the decision about the custody of their children. All subjects had decided custody by agreement with their spouse. The median time since their divorce was three years.

The investigation found that parents organized their decisions around five dimensions, in following order of importance : continuity in the children's social and physical environment; keeping young children with their mother; the children's

social-emotional ties; the moral character of each parent; and each parent's ability to supervise and provide for the children. The authors noted that the order of importance for these factors was related to whether or not the subject had custody. Their subjects also reported that, with the benefit of hindsight, they would have given greater priority to the child's wishes and less importance to parental morals and to the maternal preference with young children.

Although the Marschall and Gatz survey represents a preliminary basis for understanding parents' decisions about custody, it suffers from some major limitations. First, the survey questionnaire format imposes constraints on the parents' responses. The parents were limited to the 15 criteria listed. The investigators did not specify how they derived these items and they reported no procedures which would indicate that these items were exhaustive in tapping all major aspects of the parents' decisions.

A second major drawback of the survey is the retrospective nature of the data. The authors did not report the range of time since the divorce for their sample but the median time of three years suggests that the range was substantial. The exact nature and degree of distortion in describing a decision that was made months and years previous is unknown but is likely to be considerable. Their own data, with obtained differences between custodial and noncustodial parents on what was described as a consensual decision, suggests that significant and systematic distortions may occur. Unfortunately, the nature of their data precludes any conclusion about whether their obtained differences represent original differences in perception at the time of the decision between custodial and noncustodial parents or differences that evolve with their experience in the roles of full- and part-time parents.

A third and related problem with the survey is the limited sample. Although the subjects represented a cross-section of the population in geographic location, education, and socioeconomic status, fathers were somewhat under-represented (37%) and the small number of mothers who did not have custody of their children (8) threatens the reliability of some of the statistical analyses. But the major limitation of the sample is that only one of the participants in a two-person decision was sampled. Although subjects reported that custody had been decided in agreement with their ex-spouse, the nature of the "agreement" is unknown. Given that irreconcilable differences in the marriage provides the context for the custody decision, it is naive to assume that the nature of the agreement is either homogeneous for the entire sample or unrelated to subject's perceptions of the decision. It would be necessary to sample both partners in the decision in order to examine parental differences that occur as a function of the degree of consenses that is involved in reaching an "agreement" about custody.

The purpose of the present study is to examine thoroughly the process by which parents decide on custody of their children in a divorce. Although the right to make that decision theoretically resides in the court (United States Supreme Court, 1962), practically speaking, it remains with the parents in the absence of unusual interest on the part of the court or public complaint by a family member (Lowery, 1979; Marschall & Gatz, 1975; Lewis, Note 1). At present, it is unclear how well parents make that decision, using criteria that approximate reasonable guidelines for determining the best interests of the child.

Method

Divorcing couples with one or more minor children were identified from court records in four jurisdictions. The largest jurisdiction serves an urban-county area with a population of about 220,000. Three rural counties within a 60-mile radius were also included. Out of 497 eligible cases, sampled over a 13 month period, 61 involved couples where at least one party had moved beyond the 60-mile radius established for the study. Sixty-six of the couples had been separated for more than six months prior to filing a petition and were excluded from the study. One couple had no address listed on their petition and no phone number could be found. Forty-seven of the couples reported that they had reconciled at the time they were contacted and were not included in the study. Of the remaining 322 couples, 190 (58%) could not both be reached by phone and did not respond to letters within the 6 month period between the filing of the petition and the deadline for setting up an interview. Of the 125 couples who were contacted by phone or responded to the letter, one couple was excluded because the wife reported that she was illiterate and with 60 couples (54%) one of the parties declined to participate. With an additional 8 couples, both parties agreed to participate but only one interview was completed: with six couples, one spouse withdrew consent; with one couple, the spouse suffered a major illness before the interview could be scheduled; with one couple, the spouse moved and could not be re-located.

The interview session with the final sample of 55 couples consisted of two components: an open-ended interview and two self-report questionnaires. Pilot work showed no effects due to order of interview and questionnaire administration. All subjects were interviewed first, then filled out the questionnaires.

1. Interview. The interview collected the following information from each parent: age, education, occupation, number and ages of children from this marriage and any other relationship, length of marriage, time and context of the decision about custody, and degree of consensus with the ex-spouse about that decision. The interviewer then asked the parent to specify each consideration used in deciding custody, then to describe how important that criterion was and whether it favored the subject or the ex-spouse to have custody. The interviewer continued with each criterion offered by the parent until the parent was unable to think of anything else that influenced the custody decision.

Each interview was tape-recorded. Subsequently, parents' reports were reveiwed by the researchers and submitted to content analysis. Each factor identified by a parent was categorized as the same as one of the existing items on the Custody Decision Form or as a new item. The parent's description of the importance of each factor was coded on a three-category ordinal scale (mildly important, moderately important, very important). The parent's description of the factor's favorability was coded on a three-category nominal scale (favors father, favors neither, favors mother).

2. Questionnaires. The interview responses of an initial pilot sample of 12 couples were used to determine the adequacy of the Custody Decision Form (CDF). Items that occurred with greater than 5% frequency in the interview that were not on the Custody Decision Form were used to generate new items for the CDF for use with the present sample of subjects. This step corrects for a major limitation of previous research: correlational data analyses can yield markedly different results depending on whether or not measures of all relevant variables are included in the analyses (Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 1979). The final version of the CDF included 20 items, with an additional 6 items that were relevant to the circumstances of only some of the couples (e.g., keeping the children together, where the couple had more than one child).

Each parent was asked to fill out two forms (B and C) of the CDF. Earlier steps in the development of the CDF have been described previously (Lowery, 1981; Lowery, in press; Settle & Lowery, 1982). On Form C, parents rated the importance of 20 general criteria; each of an additional six criteria was rated only if it applied to the parent's particular circumstances. Ratings were done on an 11-point scale (1 = "Of little importance" to 11 = "Highly important"). The items are listed in Table 1.

After rating the importance of the criteria, parents filled out Form B of the CDF. This questionnaire consisted of the same items as Form C but required parents to rate the extent to which each consideration favored the mother or the father to have custody on a bipolar, 11-point scale (1 = "Highly favorable for the father" to 11 = "Highly favorable for the mother," 6 = "Equally favorable"). Pilot work had shown subjects to make little differentiation between themselves and their ex-spouses on favorability to have custody when ratings were done separately for each parent (Lowery, Note 1). The rating format of Form B was changed to the single, bipolar scale to force a more explicit comparison.

Results

Sample. The final sample of 55 couples showed the following characteristics. The mean age of the mothers was 31.0; fathers' mean age was 33.6 ($F(1,108) = 4.19$, $p = .043$). The average length of their marriage was 10.11 years. Although the court records showed that couples, on the average, had been separated 58 days before the petition was filed, the couples reported an average separation period of 69 days before filing. Sixty-five percent of the couples reported that the wife had filed the petition; 30% indicated that the husband had filed; and 5% had filed a joint petition. In contrast, 52% reported that the wife had wanted the divorce; 35% stated that the husband wanted the divorce; and 13% indicated that both parties wanted the divorce about equally. Twenty-seven percent reported that aspects of the settlement were contested, other than custody. Sixty-three percent reported that this was the first separation in the marriage. Of those who had been separated before, 61% reported only one prior separation. Couples were interviewed an average of 147 days after the petition was filed (range: 34 to 317 days). Sixty-seven percent had had their final hearing at the time of the interview.

The couples reported an average of 1.63 children from the marriage, a total of 46 girls and 42 boys. The average age of the children was 7.11 years, with boys having a mean age of 7.72 and girls of 7.47 years. None of the families had more than three children from the marriage. Six of the mothers and seven of the fathers reported having been married previously. Four of the mothers and two of the fathers reported having a child from a prior marriage living with them during the present marriage; one mother had two children from a prior marriage in her home.

The sample showed a relatively high socioeconomic level. Fathers reported an average of 14.6 years of education, mothers reported 13.7 years. The difference was not significant. The couples reported an average joint annual income, prior to separating, of $21,792. Of that amount, mothers reported contributing $739 per month, fathers $1378 per month, ($F(1,89) = 18.11$, $p < .0001$). At the time of the interview, mothers reported a mean monthly income of $798, fathers, $1225, excluding child support and maintenance paid or received ($F(1,98) = 8.78$, $p < .004$).

None of the mothers reported paying child support or maintenance to the father. Forty-seven fathers reported paying child support, an average of $416 per month. Forty-five mothers reported receiving an average child support payment of $394 per month. Eleven fathers reported paying alimony or maintenance to the mother, an average of $314 per month. Taking into account child support and maintenance, as well as gainful employment, mothers reported an average monthly income of $1059 from the three sources. Fathers' gross monthly income, adding back in what they were paying in child support and maintenance, averaged $1591.

At the time of the interview, eleven of the mothers reported having no gainful employment outside the home. The remaining 44 mothers reported working an average of 37 hours per week outside the home. All of the fathers stated that they worked outside the home, an average of 49 hours per week. This difference in hours working outside the home was significant ($F(1,97) = 24.41$, $p < .0001$).

Eighty-eight percent of the couples reported that they had reached an agreement on custody at the time of the interview. Of these, 68% decided on custody before or at the time they separated; 12% decided during the process of filing the petition; and 20% decided after the petition had been filed. Ten percent reported that custody was contested or still being negotiated. One couple reported that they had decided on split custody (30 couples reported having more than one child). Thirteen percent had joint custody, and 75% had decided that the mother was to have custody. None of the couples who had reached a decision on custody reported the father receiving custody. Sixty-four percent of the couples reported that they were in complete agreement about their decision; the remaining 36% described a decision that was less than consensual. One-way analysis of variance showed a trend ($F(1,100) = 3.02$, $p < .09$) for fathers to report less agreement about the decision than mothers.

Interview data. Subjects' responses to the questions asking them to describe the factors they had considered and to designate which parent each factor favored to have custody were coded independently by two raters. A judgment was made as to which item from the CDF corresponded to the factor mentioned; that item number was assigned to the factor unless the factor was judged to be a new consideration, something not listed on the CDF. On a subsample of 17 subjects' interviews, the raters showed 89% agreement on the classification of the factors mentioned, according to the equivalent CDF item. They showed 95% agreement on coding favorability to have custody using a three-category system: favors mother, favors both equally, and favors father.

The frequency with which various considerations were mentioned by parents is shown in Table 1. On the average, parents described 4.66 considerations as influencing their decision about custody.

Across the considerations mentioned, 22% were described as favoring the father to have custody; 61% were described as favoring the mother; and 17% were described as being equally favorable to both.

Questionnaire data. Subjects responses on the CDF-C, asking them to rate the importance of 20 criteria, were submitted to a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), using sex of subject as a between-subjects variable. The analysis showed no significant difference between mothers and fathers on the importance ratings.

Post hoc comparison of the differences between items used the within-subjects error term from a mixed, repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA). The Bonferroni t statistic showed that a difference of .92 indicates a significant difference between two items. That is, for an item to be considered rated more important than another item, there must be a difference of at least .92 between the two mean ratings. The mean importance rating assigned each item is presented in Table 1.

Given the relative consensus between the parents on the importance ratings, the ratings were also submitted to a principal components factor analysis, using orthogonal rotation. This technique allows for the identification of the underlying structure of the parents' ratings, looking at relatively independent dimensions that underlie parents' responses. Only three factors emerged that each accounted for at least 10% of the variance in the ratings. Although the labeling of factors is somewhat subjective, Factor 1 (50% of the variance) seemed to reflect a concern for selecting a parent who was both in a position to and had an interest in giving a high priority to childrearing. Factor 2 (14% of the variance) reflected more of a concern with the custodial parent's ability to maintain the child's social network, including the child's relationships with relatives and the noncustodial parent. Factor 3 (10% of the variance) seemed to reflect a concern for conventional cultural values, such as providing a good education and religious and moral training. Items with loadings of .30 or greater on these three factors are reported in Table 2.

The CDF-C had two additional items, rated on 11-point scales. The first addressed subjects' confidence that the best decision possible had been made; the second asked subjects to rate their satisfaction with the decision. Submitted to one-way ANOVA, both items showed a significant effect for sex of subject ($F(1,99) = 13.20$, $p < .001$; $F(1,97) = 26.52$, $p < .001$, respectively). Fathers reported significantly less confidence in and satisfaction with the custody decision than did mothers.

Subjects' ratings of the extent to which each consideration favored the mother or the father, in their case, to have custody (CDF-B) were also submitted to a MANOVA using sex of subject as a between-subjects factor. Here, sex of subject showed a highly significant main effect, Hotelling's $T = .67$ (approximate $F(20,75) = 2.52$, $p = .002$). Univariate ANOVA's showed a significant difference between mothers' and fathers' ratings on all but two items, placing a child with the parent of the same sex and placing a child with the mother because she is the mother. Mean ratings for mothers and fathers are presented in Table 3.

Post hoc comparison of the differences between items used the within-subjects error term for a mixed, repeated measures ANOVA. The Bonferroni t statistic showed that a mean difference of .91 in the favorability ratings of two items indicates a statistically significant difference in the ratings.

Discussion

To answer the question, "What are the most important criteria for parents making a decision about custody?" is not possible without further definition of "important." If "important" means the criteria parents report they actually used in the decision,

then the results from the interview provide an answer. If "important" means the criteria parents report they consider to be important, whether or not they use them in thier own decision, then the results from the questionnaires apply.

In terms of criteria parents actually use, the following were the six most frequently mentioned considerations: (1) ability to provide financially for the child; (2) the parent's sense of responsibility for the child's well-being; (3) the emotional quality of the parent-child relationship; (4) continuity in the child's environment; (5) the amount of time the parent would spend with the child; and (6) the preference of the child. The six most highly rated criteria present a slightly different picture. Financial consideration does not appear on the list, nor does continuity in the child's environment, time available for the child, or the child's preference. Instead, the emotional stability of the parent, the suitability of the parent's morals or lifestyle, parenting skills, and whether the parent wants custody move into ascendance.

A likely explanation of this discrepancy is that, although a number of criteria are important on an abstract level, parents narrow the domain by identifying only those they deem relevant to their circumstances. It would seem logical to infer that parents focus more on considerations that differentiate between them. That is, those considerations which most clearly favor one or the other would be more useful in making a decision than those on which the parents are equally balanced. If parents see themselves as both having about an equally close relationship with the child, that consideration would not help them resolve their dilemma (unless they are willing to consider joint custody).

This raises the question of the extent to which parents have the same perception of how different criteria favor one or the other. The results from the second questionnaire present a very clear picture: parents agreed on the favorability for custody of only two considerations and one of those two had a preference for the mother built into the wording of the item. The other item addressed the issue of keeping the child with the parent of the same sex; in a sample where the children are male and female in about equal numbers, it is not too surprising that the parents rated it about the same in terms of it favoring neither one ($\bar{X}$ = 6.27, 6.28 where 6 = "Favors neither"). On every other item, parents disagreed on the extent to which the criteria favored self or the ex-spouse to have custody. The interpretation is a little unclear. It is difficult to say whether fathers rated themselves more favorably than mothers rated them or whether fathers rated mothers less favorably than the mothers rated themselves. In light of the corresponding sex difference on confidence and satisfaction with the custody decision, plus noting that over a third of the sample reported something less than a consensual decision, it becomes clear that the decision process is not the same for mothers and fathers. Discrepancies in the outcome of the decision have been documented and obvious for a long time. Mothers are more likely to retain custody, and this was true of this sample, in 75% of the cases. It is clear, however, that this outcome does not necessarily reflect the perceptions of fathers. They see the considerations that go into deciding custody as less clearly favoring mothers to be the primary custodian. The outcome much better matches mothers' perceptions of the conditions surrounding the decision.

The findings of the present study have clear implications for additional research. They raise the speculation, for example, as to whether the discrepancy between parents' satisfaction with and confidence in a decision correspond to discrepancies in perceptions of the relative suitability of each parent to retain custody. It may well be

that, when two parents see their relative suitability quite differently, less satisfaction with whatever decision is made is bound to result. It would seem reasonable that, when one or both parties are not satisfied with the decision, greater tension and conflict over custodial issues are likely to result. This would very likely have negative consequences for the child (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Although continuing parental conflict has been documented as a major threat to children's post-divorce adjustment, much remains to be done in identifying precursors to that conflict. Identification of those contributing factors will be needed before focused and effective intervention with high risk families can be developed.

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TABLE 1

Frequency and Importance of Custody Considerations

Item #	Consideration	Frequency Mentioned in Interviews	Mean Importance Rating[1]
14	The parent's ability to provide for the child financially.	54	9.01
12	The parent's sense of responsibility to the child (making sure the child is eating properly, is dressed properly, gets medical attention when needed).	48	10.45 1
18	The emotional quality of the relationship between the child and parent (e.g., trust, warmth, and interest that are mutual).	44	10.34 2
5	The parent's ability to provide stable, continuing involvement in the same neighborhood (e.g., same home, same school).	42	7.95
17	The amount of time the parent would spend with the child if he/she did receive custody.	37	9.90
2	The wishes or preference of the child (e.g., does the child usually prefer being with one parent over the other).	29	9.15
13	The parent's moral character or lifestyle being suitable for raising a child	26	9.95 6
19	The parent's parenting skills (e.g., has reasonable expectations of the child, knows how to handle misbehavior, encourages the development of the child's talents and abilities).	24	9.99 5
9	The amount of time the parent would spend with the child if he/she did <u>not</u> receive custody (availability for visitation).	16	9.49
1	Whether the parent wants to have custody.	15	10.00 4
15	The parent's willingness to maintain a reasonably good relationship with the other parent (e.g., discussing decisions related to the child, not trying to turn the child against the other parent).	15	9.79
9	The parent being reasonably stable, mentally and emotionally.	15	10.23 3

14

15

Table 1 (Continued)

Item #	Consideration	Frequency Mentioned in Interviews	Mean Importance Rating[1]
4	Keeping the child with the mother, because she is the mother.	15	5.14
20	The parent's reluctance to get involved in a legal battle over custody.	14	8.79
8	The parent's ability and willingness to provide contact with the child's other relatives.	10	8.60
3	Placing the child with the parent of the same sex.	9	3.59
7	The parent's willingness to continue the child's religious or moral training.	6	8.58
6	The parent's ability to provide access to a good school (not necessarily the same one the child has been attending).	6	7.92
10	The parent's proper use of alcohol or drugs.	1	9.66
11	Physical health of the parent (absence of any disease or physical condition that would interfere with the parent taking care of the child).	0	8.64

[1] Items were rated on an 11-point scale, 1 = Of Little Importance to 11 = Highly Important. The critical difference between items is .92.

TABLE #2
Factor Loadings for Importance Ratings[1]

	Item	Loadings Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
1.	Whether the parent wants to have custody.	.45		
3.	Placing a child with the parent of the same sex.	.30		.53
5.	The parent's ability to provide stable continuing involvement in the same neighborhood.			.57
6.	The parent's ability to provide access to a good school.			.55
7.	The parent's willingness to continue the child's religious or moral training.			.30
8.	The parent's ability and willingness to provide contact with the child's other relatives.		.34	
9.	The parent being reasonably stable, mentally and emotionally.	.32		.33
10.	The parent's proper use of alcohol and drugs.	.68		
11.	Physical health of the parent.	.66		
12.	The parent's sense of responsibility to the child.	.77		
13.	The parent's moral character or lifestyle being suitable for raising a child.	.65		.30
15.	The parent's willingness to maintain a reasonably good relationship with the other parent.		.61	
16.	The amount of time the parent would spend with the child if he/she did not receive custody.		.60	
18.	The emotional quality of the relationship between the child and the parent.	.32		
19.	The parent's parenting skills.		.45	
20.	The parent's reluctance to get into a legal battle over custody.		.47	

[1]Only items that loaded .30 or greater on a factor are included.

TABLE 3

Mean Ratings of the Extent to Which a Consideration is Favorable to a Parent Having Custody[1, 2]

	Item	Mothers	Fathers	Significance[3]
1.	The wishes or preference of the child (e.g., does the child usually prefer being with one parent over the other).			
2.	Whether the parent wants to have custody.	8.82	6.40	***
3.	Placing a child with the parent of the same sex.	6.27	6.28	NS
4.	Keeping the child with the mother, because she is the mother.	8.27	7.66	NS
5.	The parent's ability to provide stable continuing involvement in the same neighborhood (e.g., same home, same school).	7.63	6.43	*
6.	The parent's ability to provide access to a good school (not necessarily the same one the child has been attending).	7.33	6.15	**
7.	Each parent's willingness to continue with the child's religious or moral training.	7.45	6.13	**
8.	The parent's ability and willingness to provide contact with the child's other relatives.	7.41	5.38	***
9.	The parent being reasonably stable, mentally and emotionally.	8.18	5.38	***
10.	The parent's proper use of alcohol or drugs.	7.63	5.91	***
11.	Physical health of the parent (the absnece of any disease or physical condition that would interfere with the parent taking care of the child).	6.67	5.66	***
12.	The parent's sense of responsibility to the child (making sure the child is eating properly, is dressed properly, gets medical attention when needed).	8.45	6.17	***
13.	The parent's moral character or lifestyle being suitable for raising a child.	7.84	5.51	***

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Item	Mothers	Fathers	Significance
14. The parent's ability to provide for the child financially.	5.76	4.30	**
15. The parent's willingness to maintain a reasonably good relationship with the other parent (e.g., discussing decisions related to the child, not trying to turn the child against the other parent).	7.33	5.77	***
16. The amount of time the parent would spend with the child if he/she did not receive custody (availability for visitation).	6.82	5.38	***
17. The amount of time the parent would spend with the child if he/she did receive custody.	8.04	5.87	***
18. The emotional quality of the relationship between the child and the parent (e.e., trust, warmth, and affection that are mutual).	8.24	5.53	***
19. The parent's parenting skills (e.g., has reasonable expectations of the child, knows how to handle misbehavior, encourages the development of the child's talents and abilities).	8.16	5.87	***
20. The parent's reluctance to get into a legal battle over custody (e.g., willingness to work out an agreement about custody and visitation with the other parent).	7.04	6.13	*

[1]Items were rated on an 11-point scale, 1 = Highly favorable for the father to 11 = Highly favorable for the mother

[2]The critical difference between items, using the Bonferroni t statistic, is .91

[3]The significance levels for the difference between mothers' and fathers' ratings:

* $p \leq .05$
** $p \leq .02$
*** $p \leq .005$